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# RESEARCH REPORT

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## Consumption Convergence

Deirdre Hynes

*“Once upon a time, the telephone was a telephone and the television a television and no one had heard of computers in the home. Then hybrids like computer games entered households without the newly convergent aspects even being noted. Multimedia can now allow the user/consumer to interact with a complex of materials: gaining access, making entertainment choices, responding to, or initiating, requests for information” (Silverstone, 1996: 220).*

The term ‘convergence’ has often been used over the last decade to describe the processes through which technologies, such as computers, telephony and broadcasting, have come together to spark the so-called ‘communication revolution’. This revolution has been greatly hyperbolised by a number of influential commentators in industry, government and academia. It is the aim of this paper to bring a more grounded approach to the study of convergence, in respect to consumption studies.

Convergence has more noticeably been associated with the production side of technology studies, particularly in the development and emergence of new technological systems, such as ICTs. Whilst most of the interest in this concept lies in this domain, I wish to extend the current conceptualisation of the notion to the often neglected field of technology consumption. With the convergence of media technologies, early research in the field suggests that the use and consumption of media technologies, both old and new, is being irrevocably transformed. New media networks need to be subjected to a reformulation, which involves a rethinking of the notion of the audience, and how the audience is to be studied and conceptualised in the new media environment. This paper reports on doctoral research which uses the notion of ‘consumption convergence’ to explain how media networks have come together, and how the consumption of media texts is taking place simultaneously and in close proximity to one another. It is concerned with how this transformation will influence current and future notions of the audience and uses empirical research into the domestication and use of internet technologies.

The concept was traditionally associated with the production side of technology studies, particularly technological development was dominated by a pervasive technological determinist perspective (Kelly 1999, Negroponte, 1995). Proponents of this view have argued that developments leading to a digitally based convergence of ICTs are fundamentally restructuring communications and communication industries as part of the process of ushering in the information society. However, a historical perspective on such developments strongly indicates that no technological or economic changes are so revolutionary that they completely overturn an established regime (Winston, 1998). With the ‘coming together’ of media technologies in the production/physical sense, based on a technological determinist outlook one would expect the use and consumption of media, both new and old, to be irrevocably transformed. However, this paper argues against this claim and instead adopts a social shaping approach to consumption convergence to explain the ‘coming together’ of media technologies and their eventual use and consumption in the household setting.



Silverstone (1995) warns that 'convergence' is a dangerous word because implicit in its use is a series of claims routinely made that are technologically deterministic in outlook. The first is that technological convergence is both inevitable and necessary, a claim that relies on the technological determinist perspective to inform how convergence of technologies in both the industrial and technological sense is necessary to bring about an economically successful future. According to social shaping of technology approaches, however, the future of media and information technology is neither certain nor predictable (Lie, 1996; Sørensen, 2000). The second claim is that convergence in one domain, usually the productive/technological, will have inevitable consequences in another, usually convergence in use. In the household, consumer responses to innovation in ICTs diverge repeatedly from technical forecasts based simply on new capabilities of ICTs. For example, the market failure of many new technologies, like the video telephone in the early 1970s, demonstrate the weakness of forecasts based on what technology can supply consumers, rather than on what the marketplace wants from manufacturers at any given point in time.

The idea of convergence is a crucial dimension of the reconstruction of the media and information industries world-wide. While it is not the purpose of this paper to discuss the debates concerning the implementation of regulations to bring about the bundling of services, or policies encouraging the removal of barriers to the merging of industries, some remarks on the subject are in order. The notion of convergence between traditionally separate industries can be traced back to attempts in the USA to provide telegraph and telephone services over the same network since the early 1870s. It was not until 1995 with the rising popularity of the internet, that the computer, media and telecommunications industries began to merge. A major cause for the convergence of technologies is the digitisation of all forms of information, the development of compression techniques, and the convergence of transmission platforms enabling the growing convergence of previously separate media and information technologies. International deregulation of telecommunications has meant that strictly telecommunications industries have been able to produce media products. Convergence has been most manifest in the digital communications environment with the merging of the computer, television and telecommunications industries. Those vying for a slice of the market include telephone, cable television, entertainment, broadcasting, and newspaper companies, as well as satellite, software and computer companies. These companies come from a variety of industries, and divide generally along the lines of being either content producers or technology creators, although these lines are continuously and rapidly blurring. The formerly separated worlds of publishing, broadcasting, cable and computing are rapidly converging, both in terms of ownership and in cross-industry collaboration. For example, in Ireland in 1999 NTL acquired Cablelink which in addition to cable television allowed them to provide telephony, television and internet services. This also brings about a convergence in payment modes, where one bill for those services listed above lands on the doormat instead of a few, and payable to one company.

The personal computer is generally regarded as the principle mode of access to the internet in studies of domestic use of the internet. This is also the case from the sample in the current doctoral study, but interestingly the internet is accessed via a television set-top box in a number of households. The internet set top box is an alternative internet platform available to domestic users and is instrumental in this illustration of consumption convergence. In Ireland, Unison set top technology was launched in February 2000 as a 'branding exercise' according to a Eoghan Kelly, a spokesman for Unison. Thirty thousand set top boxes have since been either purchased, given out as promotion prizes, or as freebies. There are no plans to update the technology nor continue with the exercise and Unison have since discontinued the line. The Unison set top box was targeted at an older, non-PC literate/familiar audience who wished to access the internet from their living room television instead of being locked away somewhere away from the rest of the family <sup>1</sup>. It is a Linux based platform which offers

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<sup>1</sup> Unison (Eoghan Kelly) was contacted on the 15 th April in regards to questions pertaining to the target audience and introduction of the set top box to the market.

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email/internet services and also permits the user to watch television while accessing the internet. Therefore, it is possible to consume both media concurrently by using the in-built function which allows two windows to open together – one allowing access to the internet and another window for television access. This intrinsic capability is designed to make dual consumption easier for the user/consumer/audience. Silverstone (1995) states that convergence in the domestic consumption sense has been used to describe a 'consequential convergence' in patterns of use as consumers and users interactively move from machine to machine and from one form of electronically mediated text to another. He also deviates from the technological/production sense of convergence, by adding "it can also be used to describe a kind of cultural and textual convergence in which both fact and fantasy lose their distinctiveness, and previously discrete categories of media content and function blend in an electronic hybridity: infotainment, advertising features, docu-dramas, and the elision of the live and pre-recorded" (Silverstone, 1995).

Consumption convergence did not occur by sole means of the digitisation or compression of information, nor did it occur by policies or regulations aimed at removing the obstacles in place for the merging of production industries. In the home, consumption convergence is characterised by the simultaneous use and consumption of media technologies. According to socio-technical relations theories (social construction and social shaping of technology), what was envisioned by producers and manufacturers of new media technologies might not necessarily be reflected by the user/consumers. It is a recurrent theme among advocates of technological determinist perspectives that consumers and users are 'passive dupes, as comparatively impotent, as malleable consumers, unthinking and unprotesting in the face of media technology' (Heap et al., 1995). However, the approach taken by this study contends that consumers reject, shape, resist, reshape technologies according to the exigencies of their daily domestic life. As Silverstone rightly remarks "the futures of new technologies are uncertain because the status of technology as culture is uncertain" (Silverstone, 1995). Consumption convergence, therefore, alludes to the notion that media networks are 'coming together', or becoming hybridised in the domestic sphere which has bought about a convergence in the consumption of media content. Within this notion, the stress is on the confluence of media technology networks, on social factors, and on synchronicity.

Empirical evidence gathered during ethnographic, qualitative interviews conducted in Dublin is presented below to illustrate examples of consumption convergence. One particular case features Respondent A who accesses the internet via the Unison set top box located in sitting room. As stated above, the Unison provides both internet and television services via the television screen. Since becoming separated from her husband and his departure from the domestic scene, this respondent has been faced with the loneliness of bringing up her two children on her own compounded by the impossibility of funding a baby-sitter and the cost of going out with her friends and making her something of a prisoner in her own home in the evenings. In this enforced isolation, the television and the internet have become a comfort and a companion. The experience of both is heightened by the fact that it is possible to consume both media simultaneously. Her consumption patterns are influenced by her social characteristics as a single mother. She outlines the instance of consumption convergence by stating:

*"you can watch the TV while you are using the internet, picture and picture, another section of it, you click on picture and picture and a little box appears in the corner, you can be chatting away or whatever and you can watch telly at the same time, you are not missing anything really."*

Before she realised the Unison set box had the function describe above, she found that:



*"I did miss out on certain favourite programmes, but I am able to watch them now. I didn't catch on to the way that I could watch the TV at the same time, so I do now. I can watch them whenever"*

There are other instances in the sample where respondents have noticed a coming together of their consumption patterns. One such instance is the case study involving Respondent B who uses the computer and internet in his home for activities other than leisure or communication related purposes. The PC is located in the same room, and is adjacent to the television entertainment unit. In the evenings, while he is working at school documents, reports and internet research, he states:

*"I've often had the television on in the background (while using the internet), as well as it is beside it though, I find I can multi-task at things so I can be typing away and still have an ear tuned"*

This excerpt highlights the ability of the user in question to consume more than one medium at one given time. The essence of the notion of consumption convergence points to the adeptness of the ICT user to consume a multiple of media simultaneously. Another instance provides a clearer illustration of this phenomenon. Respondent C reveals his daily pattern of media consumption is influenced by his 'addiction' to information. This excerpt below embodies the very essence of consumption convergence:

*"I might have the television on I mightn't necessarily watch it, but I might have it on while I'm in the room but while I'm on the internet...I'd have music on, the TV could be on as well in the background ...and music on at the same time, the TV would be turned down, everything's on – radiation central! . (Int.: Do you use many media simultaneously) internet and radio and music, radio and newspapers, I could have the newspaper open on the floor and be reading it while looking at the internet and have the radio on all the time through that."*

The core significance of consumption convergence is highlighted in this quote. The ubiquity of media forms available in the one space brings about the convergence of consumption of media content. The confluence of media networks such as television, print media, radio, and internet engagement with the user provides the respondent with a whole host of media options with which to interact.

In another case study, Respondent D speaks about her dual consumption of media technologies as an automatic response. Her daily patterns and habits of media consumption have been altered to accommodate her dependence on two media. The internet for communication reasons and the television for escapism:

*"I have to say when I come in it's the first thing I put on, I check emails and I'd be disappointed if I didn't have any emails and I'm a TV-aholic, I'd put on the TV I would come in here and automatically switch it on and usually I would sit down and watch it but now I find that its on and I immediately go on the internet and I'm away in another world and I wouldn't know what's going on...when I come in the door I'd usually put on the television and the internet but it's not unusual, sometimes when I go to friends of mine, not only do they have the TV and internet going but they also have music going."*

There is a temporal/spatial aspect to consumption convergence. The example referred to above, indicates both of these aspects. The spatial aspect is that the consumption of media texts occurs in the same location, and in temporal terms consumption of more than one media takes place at the same time. The spatial aspect is interesting as it confirms the fact that one location in the home has become a type of hub for competing and converging media.



This discussion of the notion of convergence and its application to the domestic multimedia environment indicates an interesting trend taking place in the household. It is possible to say that while not evident in every household in the sample, a change is taking place in the consumption of media technologies. Consumption convergence marks a move away from the traditional mode of media consumption. What was once a solitary and singular activity, e.g., early radio listening, has changed into a shared, collective experience not just of media content reception but in the form of media texts received. What makes consumption convergence unique is that the user is paying attention and is alert to competing media at the one time. Previous studies conducted by media audience research pioneers, Morley (1987), Lull (1990), Gray (1992), Haddon (1992, 1993, 2000) Haddon & Silverstone (1995, 1996), Silverstone *et al.*, (1989) etc., have focused on the use and consumption of merely one media technology. This paper has outlined the social factors involved in the 'coming together' of the media technologies and highlighted the fact that internet consumption in municipal areas of the home complements existing mature media in its environs. Consumption convergence, then, can be said to be characterised by simultaneous and conterminous use and consumption of media technologies, illustrating a move away from traditional modes of consumption practices and in which consumers reject, resist, shape, reshape technologies and place technologies in certain locations in the home according to individual codes and social actors.

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